

Plate 1. Selendang with "Piring Selempad" design showing regional and ethnic variation in batik style. Ceribon.

# ORNAMENTATION AND ORIGINALITY: INVOLUTION IN JAVANESE BATIK

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## Introduction

Clifford Geertz's coining of the phrase "agricultural involution" to describe and analyze the Javanese response to the nineteenth-century forced cultivation system has been both influential and the focus of considerable debate.<sup>1</sup> In a retrospective lecture delivered twenty years after *Agricultural Involution* was first published, Geertz laments that the argument has been interpreted independently of his other work on Javanese moral, political, practical, religious, and aesthetic ideas.<sup>2</sup>

Central to the involution thesis is the idea that the complex of social and practical processes summarized in the term "involution" was distinctively Javanese, in that it was shaped by Javanese cultural traditions, forms, and values. If this wholistic view is accepted, then one would expect to find similar involutionary tendencies, or reflections of these tendencies, in other dimensions of Javanese culture, such as the arts. Geertz foreshadows this when he says:

... at each stage of the development which we have been following on the level of the rice terrace and cane field, we could presumably have traced similar processes in the various social and cultural institutions which comprise the backbone of village life.<sup>3</sup>

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I acknowledge with thanks the helpful comments that Judith Becker, Peter Carey, Tony Day, and Clifford Geertz made on an earlier draft of this article.

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin White, *Agricultural Involution and its Critics: Twenty Years After Clifford Geertz* (The Hague: ARD Seminars Institute of Social Sciences, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Culture and Social Change: The Indonesian Case," *MAN* (N.S.) 19, no. 4 (1984): 511–32. The concept of involution has been applied in some cultural studies. See particularly Tim Behrend, "The Serat Jatiswara Structure and Change in a Javanese Poem" (PhD. dissertation, Australian National University, 1987); J. Anthony Day "Meanings of Change in the Poetry of Nineteenth Century Java" (PhD. dissertation, Cornell University 1981), and Ann Kumar, "Developments in Four Societies Over the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries," in *The Development of Indonesian Society*, ed. Harry Aveling (St. Lucia: Queensland University Press, 1979) pp. 1–14.

<sup>3</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Agricultural Involution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), p. 102.

In this discussion it is claimed that the concept of involution has the power to illuminate aspects of the aesthetic style of batik composition, and the response of the batik industry to pressure from imported batik and other textiles in the mid-nineteenth century through to the late 1960s. It will also be suggested that the concept of involution, in the sense Alexander Goldenweiser gave to the term, may serve to focus attention on an ethnocentric tendency to regard batik as a decorative tradition of great technical virtuosity, but essentially uncreative.<sup>4</sup>

### **Involution: Goldenweiser, Geertz, and Day**

Tony Day has noted that, in Goldenweiser's analysis, involution is described as an inherent tendency in "primitive" art towards complexity, elaboration, and repetitiousness—the "earmarks of involution," while in Geertz's use of the term, involution is not an inherent tendency, but an effect of colonial pressure on Javanese agriculture.<sup>5</sup>

Despite this difference, Day argues that both Goldenweiser and Geertz share the assumption that elaborateness is a sign of an absence of healthy procreation. Day links these views to Crawford's description of the "copiousness" or redundancy in Javanese language and literature. He notes that many Western commentators on Javanese literature reveal a preference for balance and simplicity in literary style,<sup>6</sup> and traces these values to the influence of post-Aristotelian rhetoric in which "figures" and "tropes" are seen as ornaments and colors added to simple direct speech.

It is this value system which Day suggests lies at the heart of Crawford's disapproval of copiousness, and of Goldenweiser and Geertz's tendency to see elaboration as negative in its effects in art and social development. But Day demonstrates convincingly that the embellishing tendency of poetry in nineteenth-century Java was not elaboration for its own sake nor a sign of colonial enfeeblement. On the contrary,

It is thus at the level of supplementing, embellishing, ornamenting that we find signs of the most intensive literary concern and creativity in both ancient and nineteenth century Java as well as evidence of reactions to historical events and historical change.<sup>7</sup>

Day's work carries an important message for the discussion of involution in batik; and Goldenweiser's comments on pattern and play within patterns seem particularly apt in the context of description of batik patterns. Crawford's concept of copiousness is quite evident in the redundancy of minor variations in patterns, which is in turn reflected in the redundancy to be found in names of batik patterns.<sup>8</sup>

### **Batik Composition**

There has been a tendency in some Western scholarship on batik to dismiss the observed variety in its composition as simply decorative and repetitive, and, in a reductive fashion, to

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Goldenweiser, "Loose Ends of a Theory on the Individual, Pattern, and Involution in Primitive Society," in *Essays in Anthropology*, ed. Robert Lowie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1936), pp. 99–104.

<sup>5</sup> Day, "Meanings of Change," pp. 6ff.

<sup>6</sup> There is a similar hankering after the balance and simplicity of style referred to by Day in Rouffaer's enthusiastic praise of the "dignity and stateliness" of the royal color scheme of *soga*, cream and indigo blue. G. P. Rouffaer and H. H. Juynboll. *De Batikkunst in Nederlandsch Indie en Haar Geschiedenis* (Utrecht: Oosthoek, 1914), pp. 307ff.

<sup>7</sup> Day, "Meanings of Change," p. 77.

devise categorizations which radically simplify and, as I suggest later, overlook important features of batik design and batik making as reported by Javanese craftworkers. The desire to simplify and create robust pattern categories which organize the abundant decorative variety into a small number of easily assimilated ideas is evident in Rouffaer and Juynboll<sup>9</sup> who collected the names of over 3,000 patterns and describe five general pattern categories and eight distinctively Javanese patterns; and in Jasper and Pirngadie<sup>10</sup> who describe eight pattern categories. More recently Monni Adams has commented on batik compositional style as follows:

Both regions [Northcoast and Central Java] however share a general compositional approach characteristic of Javanese batiks, that is, in spite of the great variety of designs in the inventory and the freedom which hand drawing allows, individual cloths display design units of small dimension which are simply repeated or alternated with another small unit over the surface of the cloth.<sup>11</sup>

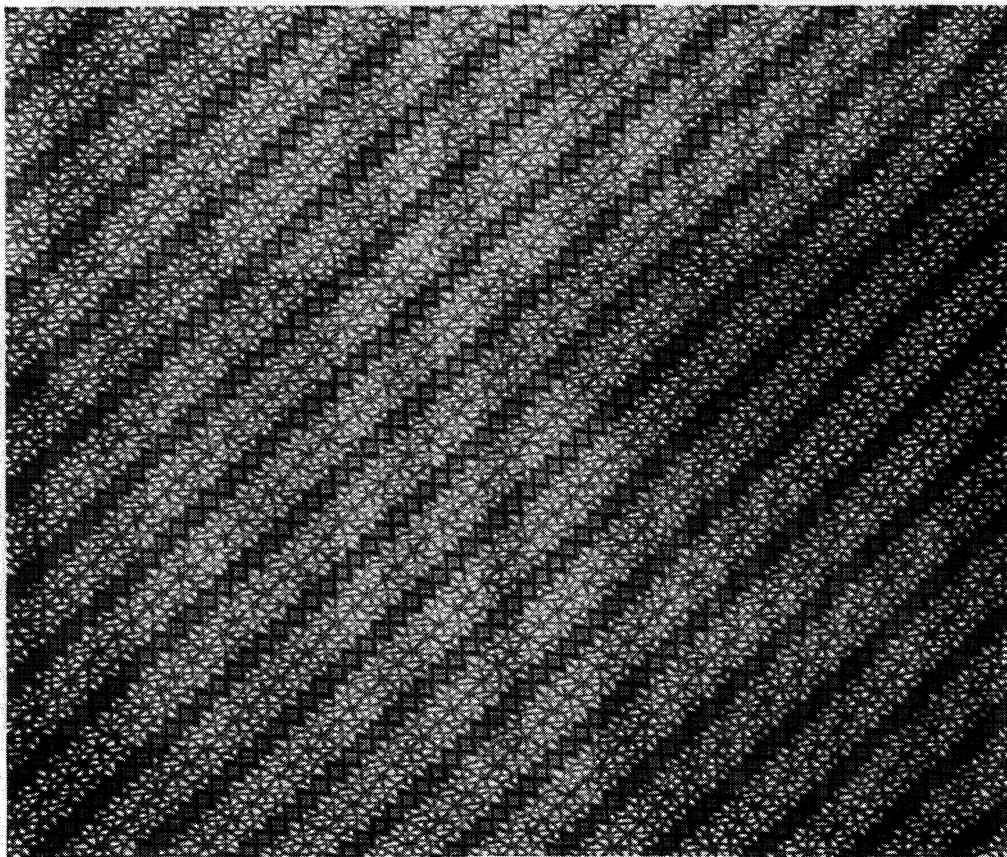


Plate 2. Ceplik pattern. Solo.

<sup>8</sup> Jasper and Pirngadie provide a list of names of batik patterns which illustrates the point well. J. E. Jasper and Mas Pirngadie. *De Inlandsche Kunstnijverheid in Nederlandsch Indie III De Batikkunst* (The Hague: Mouton, 1916), pp. 110 ff.

<sup>9</sup> Rouffaer and Juynboll, *De Batikkunst*.

<sup>10</sup> Jasper and Pirngadie, *De Batikkunst*.

<sup>11</sup> Monni Adams, "Symbolic Scenes in Javanese Batik," *The Textile Museum Journal* 3, no. 1 (1970): 25–40, p. 25. For an example of this type of design see Plate 2.

And Laurens Langewis and Frits Wagner have written:

Batik art has never made full use of the possibilities in the field of decoration. By far the majority of patterns adhere to decorations built up on a strictly metrical basis. It is only in the best examples of the *semen* patterns that the rhythmical plays a more important part. But if we examine the total ornamentation of these patterns more closely, they, too, are usually found to consist of a few homogenous parts.<sup>12</sup>

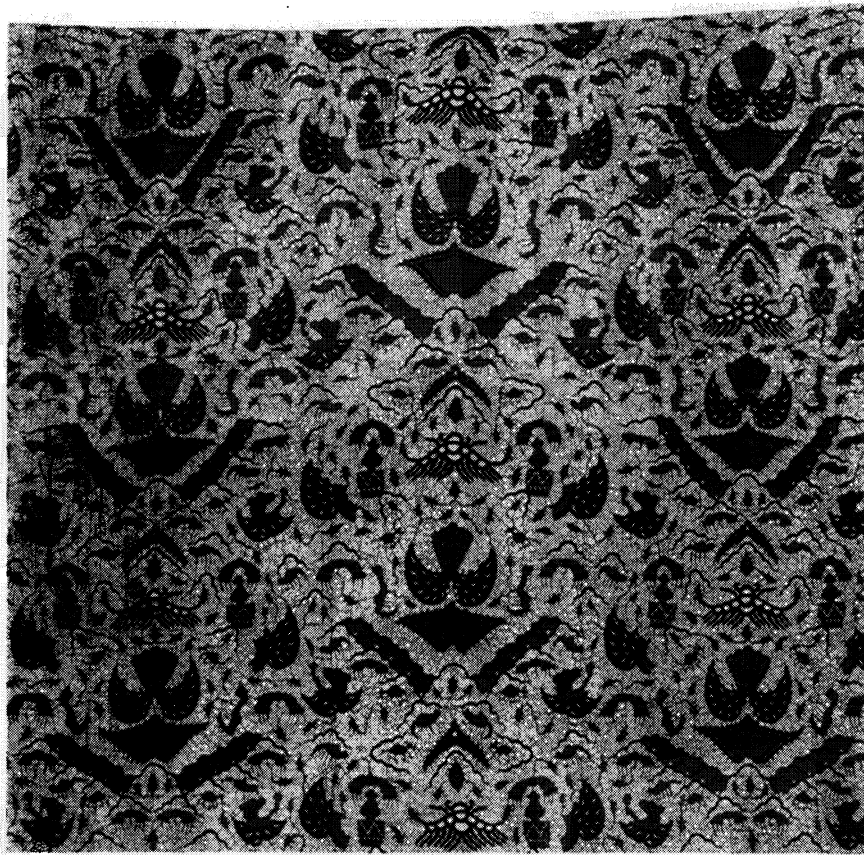


Plate 3. Kain, Semen pattern, showing that even in semen designs, the design units are repeated metrically. Yogya.

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<sup>12</sup> Laurens Langewis and Frits Wagner, *Decorative Art in Indonesian Textiles* (Leigh-on-Sea: Lewis 1964), p. 31. See also Robert Wessing, "Wearing the Cosmos: Symbolism in Batik Design," *Crossroads* 2, 3 (1986): 40–82 for a more recent statement of the same position.

Batik was scarcely mentioned in Javanese literature prior to the sixteenth century, and thus we have very little evidence to guide us in understanding Javanese modes of describing batik.<sup>13</sup> Where batik is mentioned in seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth-century sources, it is most frequently described in terms of specific garments, and not by pattern categories except in those documents which specifically restrict certain patterns to particular classes.<sup>14</sup> Indeed if categories are relied upon by Javanese, it appears that it is the surface/ground color combination, the mode of manufacture, and the region which is of emic significance, not so much the pattern.<sup>15</sup>

### Ornamentation in Javanese Art

Rouffaer's description of batik art in the nineteenth century reveals two opposed aesthetic tendencies: a Javanese tendency to proliferate and elaborate, and a Western tendency to pare away variety in an endeavor to lay bare structural principles. Rouffaer notes that there were over three thousand named patterns, but stares through that profusion to emphasize a few categories.

Day has argued that there is an "ornamenting impulse" in ancient Javanese poetry and that, far from being simply decorative, the process of embellishment was a creative inter-textual process of literary transformation designed to enliven early texts and bring them richly nuanced to contemporary readers.<sup>16</sup>

In a more closely focused study, Behrend takes up Day's thesis of the ornamenting impulse in Javanese literature and argues that ornamentation and increasing complexity of meter, narrative, and language are distinctive and deliberate aspects of change in Javanese poetry from 1600 to the 1930s.<sup>17</sup>

In a study of Javanese gamelan compositions, Judith Becker discovers an analogous tendency in musical compositions,<sup>18</sup> and Jaap Kunst draws attention to a Javanese musical

<sup>13</sup> Hardjonagoro, "The Place of Batik in the History and Philosophy of Javanese Textiles: A Personal View," in *Indonesian Textiles* (Washington: The Textile Museum 1980), p. 225; Justine Boow, *Symbol and Status in Javanese Batik* (Nedlands: Asian Studies Centre University of Western Australia, 1988), p. 21 n.1.

<sup>14</sup> Merle Ricklefs, *Jogjakarta Under Sultan Mangkubumi 1749-1792* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 163, 276; S. K. Susanto, *Seni Kerajinan Batik Indonesia* (Jakarta: Lembaga Penelitian dan Pendidikan Industri, 1980), p. 495. See Day, "Meanings of Change," p. 145, n. 1. for a note on a letter from Pakubuwana VI to Pakubuwana VII in which the exiled King requests a favorite patterned batik *dodot* (court dress) to be sent to him.

<sup>15</sup> See Danielle Geirnaert-Martin, "Ask Lurik Why Batik: A Structural Analysis of Textiles and Classifications," in *The Future of Structuralism* ed. Jarich Oosten and Arie De Ruijter. (Amsterdam: Papers of the IUAES-Intercongress, 1981), and Boow, *Symbol and Status*.

<sup>16</sup> Day, "Meanings of Change," pp. 62-63. Some other issues raised by Day in his discussion of writing as ornamentation are thought provoking in the context of making batik. Hand-waxed batik is, after all, *batik seratan* (Jav. kr.) or *batik tulis* (Jav. ng. and Indonesian). Cognate meanings of *serat* signify fine intricate patterns such as the growth rings of a tree, veins of a leaf, and a comb (no doubt because of the fine veined pattern a comb makes through the hair). In the context of batik, these images are all evocative of the fine lines made by the *canting*, and also, perhaps, of the pattern of cracking in the wax resist.

Day's argument that writing was in itself decorative, and that re-writing necessarily involved embellishment may provide a partial understanding of the ornamenting tendency in batik making, and also of the spiritual nature of batik making, for, as Day shows, in ancient Java, written embellishments performed a religious function. Regrettably, these enticing analogies cannot be explored further here.

<sup>17</sup> Behrend, *The Serat Jatiswara*, pp. 358ff.

<sup>18</sup> Judith Becker, "Time and Tune in Java," in *The Imagination of Reality: Essays in Southeast Asian Coherence Systems*, ed. Alton L. Becker and Aram A. Yengoyan (Norwood, New Jersey: ABLEX, 1979), pp. 197-210, and idem, *Traditional Music in Modern Java Gamelan in a Changing Society* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1980), pp. 20, 29.



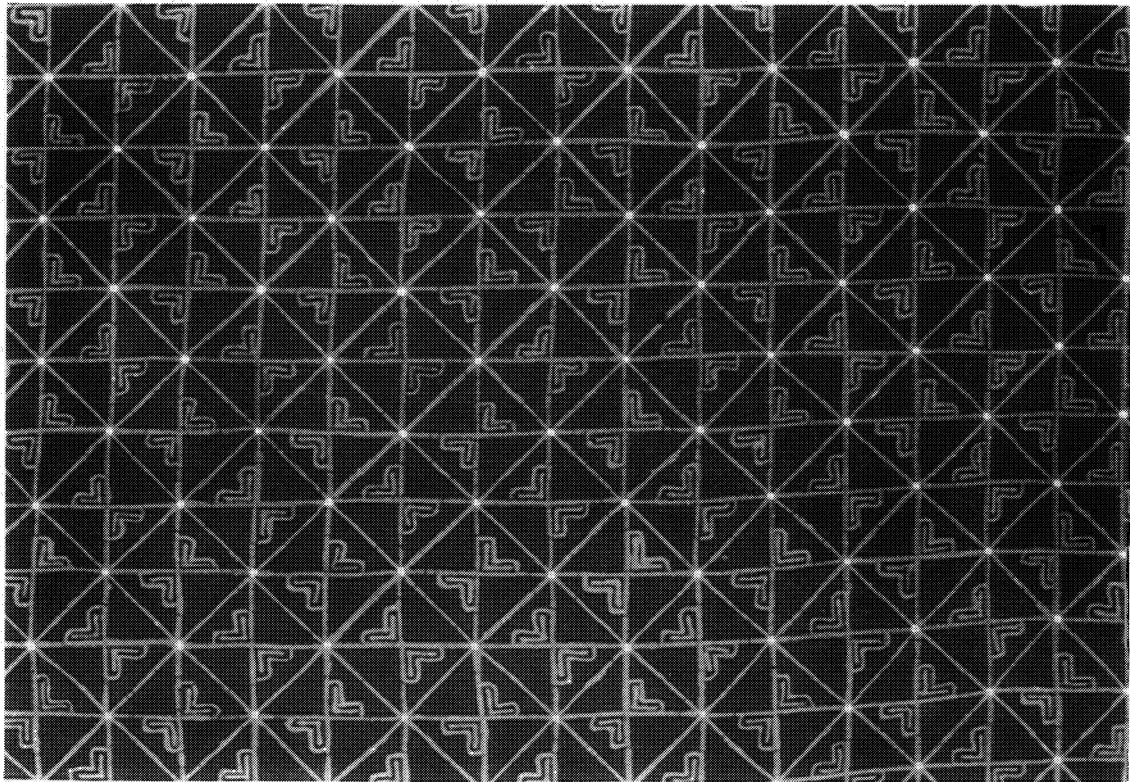


Plate 4. Simple slobok, an ancient, spare geometric design. Solo.

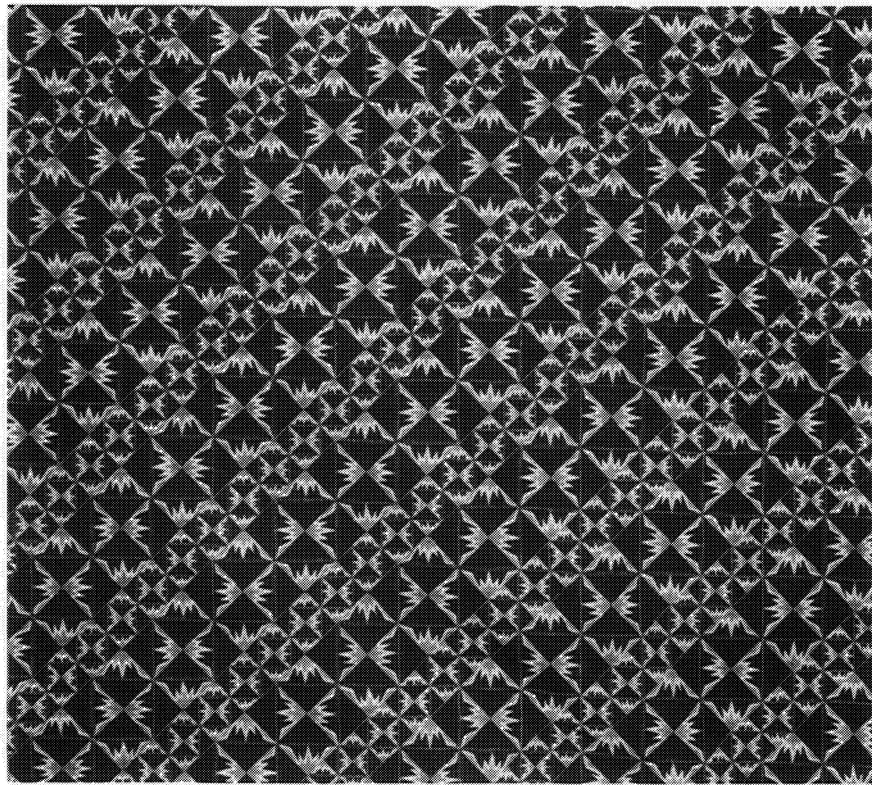


Plate 5. Slobok variation, an illustration of the inventiveness of Javanese designers. Solo.

treatise which explicitly discusses parallels between gamelan and batik compositions.<sup>19</sup> It appears, then, that this ornamenting tendency is a deep aesthetic preference amongst the Javanese which non-Javanese observers, rather than trying to simplify, should accept and explore as a stylistic difference. Indeed, it has been my experience in photographing and discussing batik that it is the variations which interest and even intrigue Javanese. The variations on motifs are a source of fascination and enjoyment, akin perhaps to the pleasure Western audiences take from individual interpretation of well-known compositions.

### The Aura of the Original

The tendency which I have noted in some Western descriptions of batik to devalue ornamentation and reductively constrain the “profusion of invention” within a parsimonious set of etic categories may owe something to two deeply rooted Western aesthetic principles: the aura of the original as described by Walter Benjamin, and the Romantic enthusiasm for untrammelled and unfettered creativity or originality in art. I will expand on these principles very briefly.

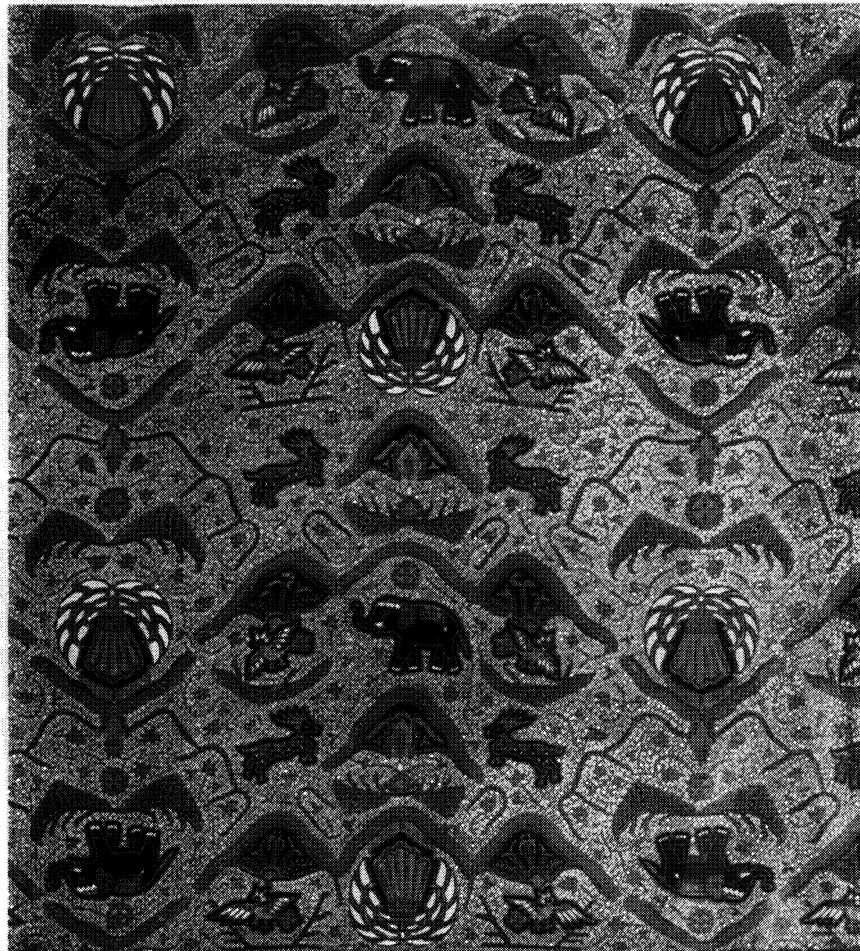


Plate 6. Kain, “Gajah Wibowo,” an auspicious symbol. Kain from Kraton Solo.

<sup>19</sup> Jaap Kunst, *Music in Java*, 2 vols. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff. 1973), 1: 248.



In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin argued that traditional art performed a ritual or "cult" function and that art works involved in ritual took on what he called an "auratic quality."<sup>20</sup> The focus on the ceremonial role of art works expresses itself in the value placed on the authenticity of works, their physical character and specificity, which engender attitudes of respect, awe, and reverence. The works gain value from their repeated use in ritual and they may be protected and cared for as cherished, ritually powerful objects.<sup>21</sup>

Benjamin's concept of aura and the implication of art in social institutions, and the valorization of authenticity or originality, ironically, provides another perspective on the tendency we have observed to favor "original" compositions and downgrade the creativity expressed in ornamentation and adaptation of established patterns, the characteristic practice in batik work. "Ironically," because it was the very process of repeating, ornamenting, or combining segments of known patterns which for Javanese gave batik its auspicious aura. To paraphrase Levi-Strauss, for Javanese every version is the original, but in the Western tradition, the original is mythologized as unique, the fruit of individual genius. Both cultural traditions value the concept of originality and authenticity, but are disposed to find it in different processes.

The hankering after a reified original is fixed only on the visual aspects of batik textiles, and ignores the process of batik making which for Javanese was an equally important aspect of the art. The process of making batik was traditionally an extended exercise in self control and an intimate involvement in stroking potent symbols. As the *canting* (waxing pen) moved in and around the shapes, the batik artist brought to life symbols and patterns which radiated auspiciousness through their traditional associations.<sup>22</sup> It is the significance of the making of batik which is the key to understanding that, for Javanese, repetition is not mere repetition, but re-creation, a cyclical process of renewal.<sup>23</sup>

Two aspects of batik design: first, the practice of maintaining an inventory of patterns and reproducing them with individual variations, and second, the practice of repeating motifs in metrical distribution across space, are both aspects of the inscription of time in batik art. Repetition is also tied to the invocation of power and spiritual potency as repetition, like a mantra, multiplies auspiciousness.<sup>24</sup>

The visual device of repetition to inscribe time in Javanese batik is the focus of another disjunction between Western and Javanese aesthetic principles. The eighteenth-century scholar Gottfried Lessing argued in his essay *Laocoon*<sup>25</sup> that space and time are different modalities, and on that premise distinguished between two categories of arts: those based on co-existence in space, and those based on consecutiveness in time. The properties of the visual arts, Lessing claimed, made them most suited to the expression of spatial form, and literature, being an articulation of sounds or words in time, was most suited to narrative, the unfolding of events in time.

<sup>20</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 217–51.

<sup>21</sup> Boow, *Symbol and Status*, p. 57.

<sup>22</sup> Hardjonagoro, *The Place of Batik*, p. 229; Boow, *Symbol and Status*, p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> Soemarsaid Moertono. *State and Statecraft in Old Java* (Ithaca, NY: Modern Indonesia Project Cornell University, 1968), p. 38; Ricklefs. *Jogjakarta Under Sultan Mangkubumi*, p. 185.

<sup>24</sup> Personal communication, Hardjonagoro 1988.

<sup>25</sup> Gottfried Lessing, *Laocoon* (London: Dent, 1970).

In Javanese batik, Lessing's linear conception of time and the suggestion that the visual arts are unsuited to expressions of temporality are both confounded by the characteristic style of batik composition. A batik composition is simultaneously spatial, being distributed in three dimensions (the pattern is repeated on the reverse) and richly suggestive of temporality through the investment of time in the making, in the intertextual process of evocation of past patterns, and in the pattern repeats on the individual piece. Central Javanese batik is distinctive, too, in that it does not structurally limit patterns. The compositions may be seen as segments of larger, infinitely extended batik patterns. Javanese batik composition thus fuses space and time, destroying the simplistic distinction Lessing devised and suggesting that batik art cannot be fully appreciated if only the visual qualities of the surface pattern are considered.<sup>26</sup>

The Romantic tradition valued literary works as original expressions of an author's individuality and creative mind. Anything that did not express the "individual specialities" of the author was deficient and uncreative by definition. It is easy to appreciate how the practical demands of the process of translation or adaptation would be devalued by the Romantics if the process was understood to be merely a *mechanical* reproduction of another writer's work. The stress placed on the literary work as a unique, individual expression, as an "original" creative work, is thus in part an explanation of the Western disposition, before the implications of intertextuality were fully appreciated, to consider adaptations and versions of "original" works as somehow lacking in real artistic worth.

The Romantic belief that translation could only imitate and never recreate the beauty of the original may also have owed something to Platonic ideas about art being an imitation of reality. A translation was a double remove from reality, a shadow of a shadow.<sup>27</sup>



Plate 7. Kain from the Haji Bilal family which was made to commemorate a family engagement. The pattern incorporates the date of the engagement.

<sup>26</sup> Judith Becker describes a similar feature of Javanese gamelan compositions. See her "Time and Tune in Java," pp. 197–210, and *Traditional Music in Modern Java Gamelan in a Changing Society*, pp. 27–28.

<sup>27</sup> Timothy Webb, *The Violet in the Crucible* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 27–29.

In the sense that Goldenweiser used the term “involution,” then, batik design was indeed involutionary. Batik textiles in Java up to the mid-nineteenth century presented a somber but rich display of ornate, complex, and repetitious compositions which were regionally diversified and implicated in social institutions, values and rituals.<sup>28</sup> Batik art is involutionary in the sense that it displays a characteristic tendency to repeat and embellish patterns. But this tendency is not an effect of external influences or constraints, but a reflection of communal values, aesthetic preferences, and a world view which is also evident in other branches of the arts. Nor was eighteenth- and nineteenth-century batik involutionary in any negative sense as implied by Goldenweiser’s use of “play” to describe variation, and his view that involution is “. . . progressive complication, variety within uniformity, virtuosity within monotony.” Only a superficial concentration on the visual quality of batik composition, and lack of attention to the process of production could support such a position.

But as the batik industry came under pressure in the nineteenth century, and expanded and changed its structure as a direct result of those pressures, sections of the industry did react in ways which are involutionary in the sense Geertz understands and uses the term, and it is to an outline of that (static) development that we now turn.

### The Nineteenth Century: A Turbulent Period

In the early nineteenth century Dutch, Swiss, and English textile manufacturers put pressure on the traditional industry with imports of machine printed imitation batiks which sold more cheaply than the locally produced batik. More than that, however, the colors of the imported batiks presented a challenge to the local industry. Bright alizarin dyes introduced the novelty of new colors, and chemical dyestuffs were developed which reproduced fair imitations of the soft *soga*<sup>29</sup> browns of Central Javanese batik, and could be dyed in a fraction of the time taken to apply the *soga* Java.<sup>30</sup>

The pressure on the indigenous batik industry was not effectively countered until the happy invention of a process of stamping-on the wax resist enabled the Javanese to increase their productivity dramatically and thus lower their prices on finished batiks.

In the batik industry, then, the involutionary tendency, which we claim resulted from colonial pressure, was not self-defeating in the economic sense, as it was in agriculture according to Geertz, for the *cap* (waxing stamp) surely saved the industry from complete collapse. But the changes introduced by the *cap* did lead, particularly in the batik of the Principalities, to aesthetic stiffening and artistic static development. Our claim here can only be sketched in general terms, for to present the argument in detail more research would need to be done on nineteenth-century collections of batik.

The aspects of static development in Central Javanese batik which I suggest are a direct result of the pressure of the economic changes introduced in the colonial period are these: a tendency to miniaturize patterns and ornamentation and place great emphasis on technique; a practice of using *cap* batik to mirror hand drawn batik and to disguise as far as possible its

<sup>28</sup> Geirnaert-Martin notes that the ritual role of batik was more limited than that of the more ancient lurik textiles. “Ask Lurik Why Batik,” p. 155.

<sup>29</sup> “Soga Java” is a brown dye made from extracts of the dye wood Tegerang (*Cudrania javanensis*), and bark from the Soga jambal (*Pelthophorum pterocarpa*) and Tingi (*Ceriops tagal*) shrubs. Soga dyeing was a drawn-out process, and repeated steeping of batiks in the *soga* contributed to the soft, diffused edges typical of patterns dyed in natural *soga*.

<sup>30</sup> Stuart Robinson, *A History of Dyed Textiles* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1969), pp. 40ff; Alfred Steinmann, “The Art of Batik,” *CIBA Review* 58 (1947): 2090–2115.

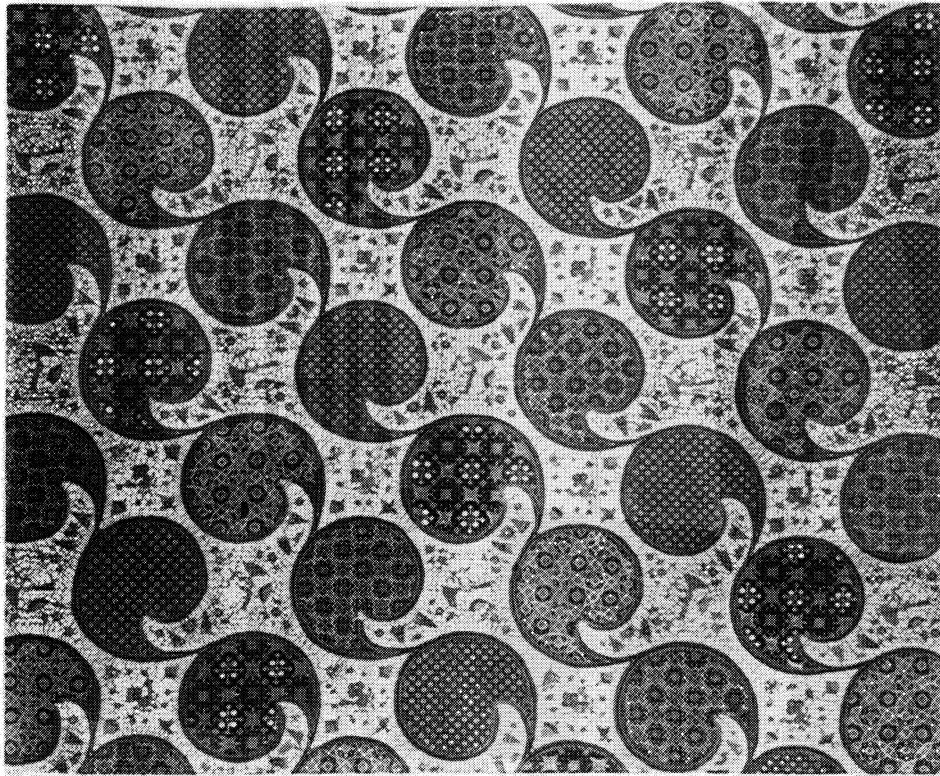


Plate 8. Miniaturization is well illustrated in this kain with its pattern of snails, all decorated with a variety of different batik motifs done in miniature. Yogya.

true nature; a resistance to adopting new color schemes eagerly adopted in other parts of Java; a tendency to select and promote a limited number of patterns from the pattern inventory; and a disposition to use synthetic dyes to mirror existing color schemes rather than adopt different schemes. Let us discuss each in turn.

### **The Role of the Canting in Batik Style**

The tendency to refine, “re-write,” or elaborate established patterns has been assisted by technological developments in batik making. The delicacy of the *canting* almost inevitably led to the fine drawing and elaboration of known motifs—particularly the background spaces.

The delicacy of line the *canting* made possible was complemented by the smooth surface of the fine, closely woven cambric which Dutch merchants imported into Java in the nineteenth century.<sup>31</sup> In Javanese hands, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century,

<sup>31</sup> For an account of the import of cotton textiles into Java, and local production, see Peter Boomgard, *Children of the Colonial State: Population Growth and Economic Growth in Java 1795–1880* (Amsterdam: Academisch Proefschrift, Vrije Universiteit te Amsterdam, 1987); Christine Dobbin, “Islam and Economic Change in Indonesia circa 1750–1930,” in *Indonesia: Australia Perspectives* ed. James J. Fox (Canberra: Australian National University, 1980); Hiroshi Matsuo, *The Development of the Javanese Cotton Industry* (Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies Occasional Papers Series No. 7, 1970). Barbara Watson Andaya has provided a detailed account of imports of textiles of all sorts to Jambi and Palembang in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and gives a valuable discussion of the role of Javanese textiles in these two regions. Barbara W. Andaya, “The Cloth Trade in Jambi and Palembang Society during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *Indonesia* 48 (October 1989): 26–46.

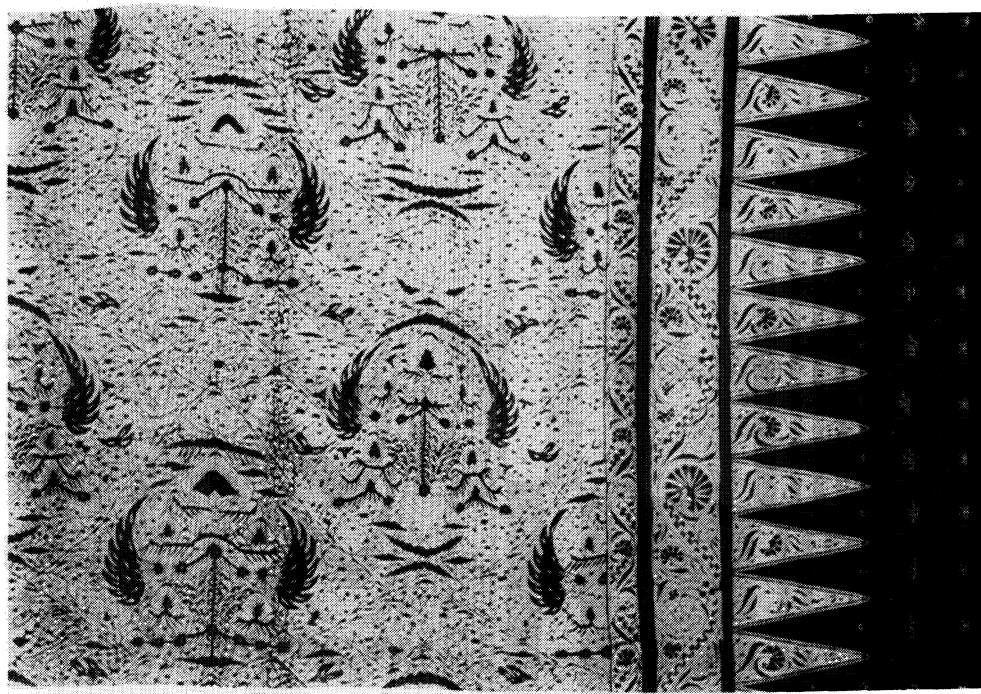


Plate 9. Ancient kain from the museum Kraton Kasepuhan, Ceribon showing the open, loose graphic line of nineteenth-century Ceribon batik. Indigo and white. Ceribon.

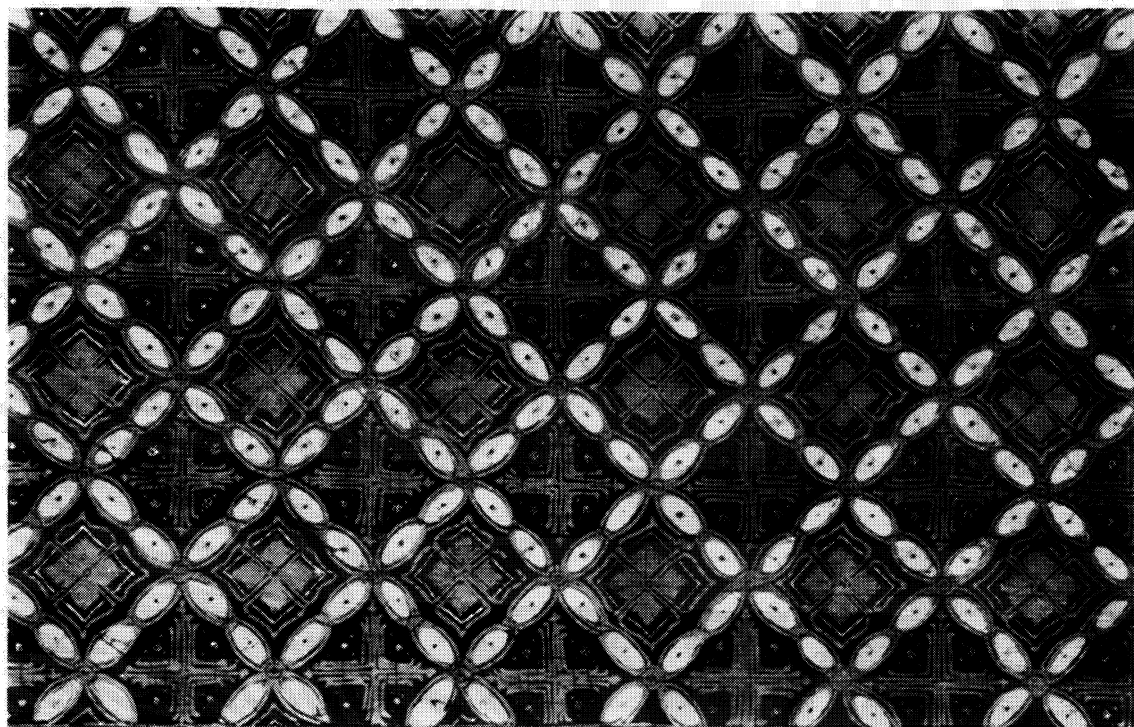


Plate 10. The extreme delicacy of the canting is evident in the subtlety of this kain "Sawat Pengantin" from Ceribon.



the *canting* became increasingly a tool for miniaturization, for shaping and pruning, not for marking out new landscapes. In a way it is the artistic analogue of the *ani ani* (harvest blade), so famous from the literature on Javanese agriculture. Both tools demand a delicacy and expertness of touch and control. They are tools of care, of painstaking attention to detail, of subtle involvement in the work in hand.

It is clear, however, that in earlier periods the graphic flexibility of the *canting* was fully appreciated and put to work in producing textiles with stronger narrative patterns. Rouffaer notes that batiks decorated with wayang figures and scenes imposed on *geringsing* (background pattern of scales) fields were greatly valued in the sixteenth century.<sup>32</sup>

In the modern era, it is only the bold narrative drawing of batik from the Kraton Kasepuhan, the lively shapes from Indramayu, the naturalistic bouquet motifs with fluttering butterflies and tiny birds of the north coast "encim" tradition, and the crowded, lively Chinese processions and batik calligraphy from Ceribon which reveal the freehand potential of the *canting*.



Plate 11. Narrative graphic style from Indramayu.  
Photograph shows woman waxing-in sea creature.

In Central Javanese batik of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is my impression that the narrative or realist potential of the *canting* was played down and its ability to ornament in an ever more ornate style became most valued.<sup>33</sup> This is something that needs to be checked against ancient collections and photographs. Certainly it is my

<sup>32</sup> Rouffaer, *De Batikkunst*, p. 429.

<sup>33</sup> Boow's discussion of batik aesthetics with contemporary designers in Solo and Yogya indicates that abstraction is highly valued in batik composition. Boow, *Symbol and Status*, pp. 121ff.

impression that the batiks of the twentieth century are far more obsessively decorated than early nineteenth-century batiks.<sup>34</sup> We might also note that Yogyakarta prides itself on a spare, relatively unadorned style of batik which Yogyakarta batik makers trace to the Kraton Nyayogyakarta's desire, following the division of Mataram, to present itself as more "classical" or authentic than the Solo court.<sup>35</sup> This stance supports the belief that ancient batik patterns were less elaborated than contemporary patterns, and is paralleled by Day and Behrend's observations on poetic complexity increasing over time.

We might hypothesize that the tendency to exploit the micro scale of the *canting* more than its sweeping, fluid drawing potential was perhaps a function of a desire to distinguish hand drawn batik from imported imitation batik and cleverly designed *cap* batik, so as to preserve its exclusiveness.<sup>36</sup> It is evident that batik technique is sensitive to market demand. Joseph reports that in Bantul near Yogyakarta there were workers who produced finely drawn batik for kraton circles, whilst other workers in the same village produced the typically dashed off work that is now called batik Bantul and appreciated for its spontaneous drawing.<sup>37</sup>

### The Impact of the Cap

The invention of the *cap* in 1850<sup>38</sup> at a time when the batik industry was threatened by imports, and when Java was increasingly affected by pressures from the colonial regime, was a crucial factor in the late nineteenth-century static development of the aesthetic style of batik composition.

The *cap* was a device which had the potential for radically altering the aesthetics and organization of batik production. The *cap* process took the delicate, patient art of applying the wax resist with the *canting*, and put the waxing process in the stronger, more restless hands of men. The stamping process itself was faster, more mechanical and lacked the meditative quality of working with the *canting*. Following Benjamin, this was a shift from the involvement of batik in ritual—at least in terms of manufacture—into mechanical reproduction. Yet it seems that for reasons that were probably a mixture of marketing, product specialization, and cultural conservatism, *cap* batik set out to emulate hand-drawn batik.

There were real difficulties in manufacturing stamps which could reproduce the intricacy and detail of hand drawn patterns. Yet despite these difficulties, Javanese batik facto-

<sup>34</sup> Crawford, of all the nineteenth-century commentators on batik, is alone in describing batik as crude both in color and execution. He says "... the greater the refinement that is attempted, the more certain seems to be the failure." Crawford attributes the lack of refinement to the coarse quality of Javanese woven cotton. Certainly the texture of the cotton to be decorated does impose a practical constraint on the degree of fineness of line that can be drawn and then preserved during the long dyeing process. J. Crawford. *History of the Indian Archipelago*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Constable, 1820), 1: 180–81.

<sup>35</sup> Ricklefs, *Jogjakarta Under Sultan Mangkubumi*, p. 425.

<sup>36</sup> In 1988 Hardjonagoro said that in recent years, he has made his designs, such as his "Kembang Bangah" pattern, deliberately smaller and smaller so that the hand-drawn quality of his work is immediately obvious. In his view, although batik and other beauties of traditional Javanese culture still barely survive in contemporary society, they do so on a rubbish heap, in the same way as the "kembang bangah" grows and blossoms in such places.

<sup>37</sup> Rebecca M. Joseph, "Batik Making and the Royal Cemetery at Imogiri," *The Textile Museum Journal* 24 (1985): 83–90; Benjamin Higgins, *Entrepreneurship and Labor Skills in Indonesian Economic Development: A Symposium* (New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1961).

<sup>38</sup> Rouffaer, *De Batikkunst*, pp. 21–22.

ries went to great lengths to make stamps which would allow them to reproduce faithfully the *batik tulis* (hand waxed batik) tradition of design. Fine strips of copper needles were painstakingly assembled to match well-known patterns. *Cap* makers made special and ingenious efforts to disguise the continuations in the patterns, a reflection of their desire to reproduce the style of *batik tulis*. Paired stamps were made so the resist could be applied accurately to both surfaces of the cloth. The imperative to copy the precise resist pattern of hand-drawn batik turned waxing with the *cap* into a tedious, exacting task, rather than one which maximized output.

The *cap* process probably saved the indigenous industry from being swamped by the imitations from Europe. However, the established inventory of patterns was reproduced and reinforced, but without the natural process of embellishment and variation which had always been a feature of batik making. The *cap* introduced an aesthetic stiffening into batik composition in two senses: the contours and lines of the patterns became more rigid, and the *cap* constrained opportunities for variation and ornamentation.<sup>39</sup>

The widening market for batik created by the *cap* process simultaneously restricted the variety of batik composition. Paramita Abdurrachman has noted that, of the thousands of batik patterns that existed, it is a few "royal" patterns which have remarkably become most popular and most reproduced in contemporary Indonesia.<sup>40</sup> She suggests that this popularity is tied, first, to a desire in sections of the community to remove the barriers from something from which they were once excluded by social circumstances, birth, and occupation. Thus a few patterns became accepted as definitive of Javanese style, and were widely reproduced. Second, where a market does not share the nuances of batik composition, there is a tendency to simplify and standardize patterns so they are instantly recognizable. Abdurrachman suggests that, in addition to their status value, the strong visual qualities of the royal patterns, have played an important role in their popularity.<sup>41</sup> But the widespread adoption of the one pattern so unambiguously connected with sovereignty may have more than visual significance. It may have political significance of the kind Ben Anderson explores in his discussion of "imagined communities," a tantalizing possibility which cannot, however, be pursued further here.<sup>42</sup> But while some patterns have become pre-eminent, nevertheless it is the whole style of intricate, *tulis*-style Central Javanese batik which has become widely popular and imitated in the *cap* process.<sup>43</sup>

The developments brought about by the *cap* process were restricted to the economic aspects of batik making. The aesthetic conventions of batik, particularly in the Central

<sup>39</sup> There was a practice of combining *cap* and *tulis* techniques on one piece. This bet-each-way process betrays the batik maker's unease with the mechanical production of batik. The volume of production of *cap/tulis* batik is not known. My impression is that it was never a major part of *cap* manufacture. R. A. Praptini's paternal grandmother was the head of a batik enterprise in Solo which became widely known for the innovative practice of combining stamped designs with hand drawn motifs on the one piece. These batiks were sold as "Tjap Partan." Personal communication R. A. Praptini, Solo 1988.

<sup>40</sup> P. A. Abdurrachman, "Nilai-Nilai Budaya Batik Tradisional," Working Paper presented at an exhibition and discussion of traditional batik, Jakarta, October 27–28, 1986. The commercialization of restricted patterns began in the eighteenth century as Ricklefs reports, see *Jogjakarta Under Sultan Mangkubumi*, p. 276.

<sup>41</sup> Abdurrachman, "Nilai-Nilai Budaya Batik," p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Ben Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>43</sup> Boow, *Symbol and Status*, p. 56; Robyn J. Maxwell and John R. Maxwell, "Political Motives: The Batiks of Mohamad Hadi of Solo," in *To Speak With Cloth*, ed. Mattiebelle Gittinger (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History University of California Los Angeles, 1989), pp. 131–50.

Javanese kingdoms, remained intact, and even became an obsessive ideal as *cap* and *tulis* batik competed for markets and for recognition and acceptance.

Thus it appears that an opportunity to modernize and recast batik, freeing its symbolism and ritualistic mode of production from its implication in patterns of hierarchy, regionalism, and the constraints of established canons of composition was only partially realized in the late nineteenth century. Batik *cap* from the Central Javanese region provided more of the same, but at a cheaper price, for a rapidly developing indigenous market—a market which significantly included non-Javanese, in Sumatra, Bali, Surinam, and Madagascar.

### The Impact of Synthetic Dyes

The obvious advantages of color fastness, speed of dyeing, and ease of application of synthetic dyes were all appreciated by Javanese batik makers following the introduction of reliable synthetic dyes into Java at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>44</sup> But the wide range of colors which became locally available was not taken up by traditional batik makers except in workshops located in Batavia and other north coast centers. The possibilities synthetic dyes offered for changing long-established color combinations were ignored in other centers. More than that, however, European manufacturers were drawn into making dyes which would reproduce as closely as possible the familiar subtleties of Javanese dyes, especially the *soga*. In the same way that the *cap* process was bent to reinforce established compositions and technique, synthetic dyes were used to speed up the process of production but not to alter the general aesthetic characteristics of traditional batik. An explanation for this might be made out in terms of the points made above about the demand for “classical” batik and in terms of the production of indigo in south Central Java. More significantly, the color scheme of Central Javanese batik was ritually significant in itself.<sup>45</sup> The characteristic opposition of light and dark in a composition inscribed cosmological ideas focused on dualisms such as male/female, day/night, life/death. *Soga* brown is not considered a color, but plays instead a liminal role, in that it allows white to look lighter, and blue and black, darker.<sup>46</sup> In a tradition which used color more as tone than hue, it is easy to understand that “classical” Yogya and Solo were very slow to adopt a richer palette. The chemical dyes which were used in the principalities were used to preserve ancient tonalities, and modern technology was drawn into the support of long-established conventions.

In summary, then, our suggestion is that the economic pressures which affected the batik industry in Java from the mid-nineteenth century up until the Second World War when shortages of cotton brought almost all batik making to a stop, had a positive impact on the viability of the industry but a variable effect on batik style and values. Many centers took readily to the *cap* and synthetic dyes and vigorously developed new styles and compositions, even producing textiles which combined characteristics of a number of different regions.<sup>47</sup> It was in the princely lands that there was a resistance to change in the face of increasing economic pressure, and there the changes that were made tended to be obsessive and artistically regressive.

<sup>44</sup> Robinson, *History of Dyed Textiles*, p. 41.

<sup>45</sup> Hardjonagoro, *The Place of Batik*, p. 232.

<sup>46</sup> Geirnaert-Martin, *Ask Lurik Why Batik*, p. 180.

<sup>47</sup> These batiks were known as “*tiga negeri*” (three countries or regions), as they combined colors and motifs from three different regions. Inger McC. Elliot, *Batik: Fabled Cloth of Java* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1984), pp. 170–73.

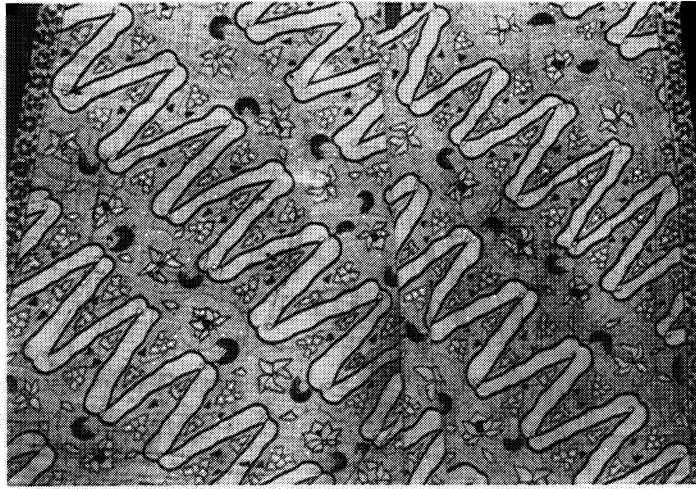


Plate 12. Parang variations. Variation #1.

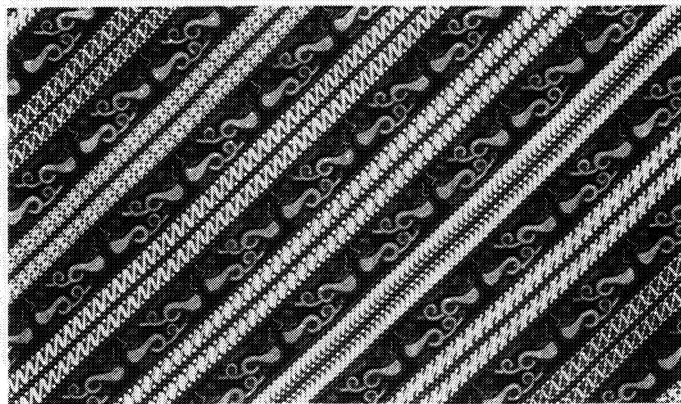


Plate 13. Variation #2.



Plate 14. Variation #3: Sultan Hamengkubuwono X wearing court costume.



Why might this be so? The courts had shown themselves to be very receptive to imported textiles, patterns, and costume in the past.<sup>48</sup> What was the nature of the resistance to stylistic change in batik in Central Java? In answer, we note that in the princely lands there was a continuing link between batik and ceremonial. Batik had, after all, been required court dress since the early seventeenth century. This provided a market for batik, and maintained the demand for batik of a special quality. In Benjamin's terms, the auratic quality of batik was strongest and most enduring here. There was also a pool of labor who could continue to make batik because their maintenance was in the hands of the palace.<sup>49</sup> There was also, as other writers have suggested, a desire in the courts in this period to rely upon the arts as a way of maintaining the glory and style of the kings whose political and economic power was eroding.<sup>50</sup>

### Further Research

This brief and oversimplified account of involution in batik art has been set out in the hope, following Swallow,<sup>51</sup> that it may stimulate further enquiries into the aesthetic style of batik and its continuities with other Javanese arts.

A thorough study of ornamenting practices and values needs to be made.<sup>52</sup> In some pattern categories—the *parang* (slanting, interlocked spirals) group for example—ornamentation and variation is a matter of adaptation and variation in size, shape, and internal space, for the *parang* patterns are mostly devoid of any *isen isen* (small scale, decorative motifs) in-filling. In other patterns, a wonderful variety of naturalistic *isen-isen* motifs (scattered rice, doves' eyes, curly hair, fish scales, and all sorts of graphic devices such as dots, whorls and lines), and adaptation and combination of motifs are common practices. Regional style will make the study of ornamentation a rewarding field of research.

The kind of enquiries I have in mind will draw on a richer range of data than is often used in studies of batik. The collections of batik from the nineteenth and early twentieth century in museums in Europe, North America, and Indonesia might become the focus of a diachronic study of ornamentation and variation in batik. The trading records and invoices of batik makers, the order books and notes from north coast studios, and the labels, packaging and advertising material of batik workshops may shed light on their design and compositional practices.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Peter B. R. Carey, personal communication 1985; Barbara Andaya reports similar tastes among the courts of Jambi and Palembang in "The Cloth Trade," p. 37.

<sup>49</sup> Philip Kitley, "Portrait of an Artist: Nyai Bei Mardusari," *The Textile Museum Journal*, (forthcoming 1992); Boow, *Symbol and Status*.

<sup>50</sup> Kumar, *Developments in Four Societies*, pp. 40, 44; W. F. Wertheim. *Indonesian Society in Transition: A Study of Social Change* (The Hague: Van Hoeve, 1969), pp. 289–90.

<sup>51</sup> D. A. Swallow, "Javanese Batiks: Meaning, Interpretation and Change," *Indonesia Circle* 42 (1987): 33–55

<sup>52</sup> A. N. J. a Th. Van Der Hoop's neglected *Indonesian Ornamental Design* (Bandung: Koninklijk Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen, 1949) is an early study which may be a useful starting point for further research.

<sup>53</sup> The Yogyakarta workshop "Yogya Kembali," part of the Bilal family's enterprise, published in 1974 a small booklet containing a translation of the *Surat Yasin*. In the introduction, the director of the firm thanks his wife who "*bertambah-tambah corak-ragamnya yang segar, menarik dan selalu up to date mengikuti irama budaya*" (who has continuously added compositions which are fresh, interesting, up-to-date and in harmony with our culture). One label used by the Bilal enterprise features a portrait of Sitti Suharny, below which is printed the phrase "Jogjakarta Hadiningrat," and on the right, a line drawing of a *pendopo*, or aristocratic reception hall. The words and the drawing create the (false) impression that Sitti Suharny is of aristocratic birth or connections—or both, an obvious example of a Yogyakarta batik maker "trading" on the associations of the art with the court.

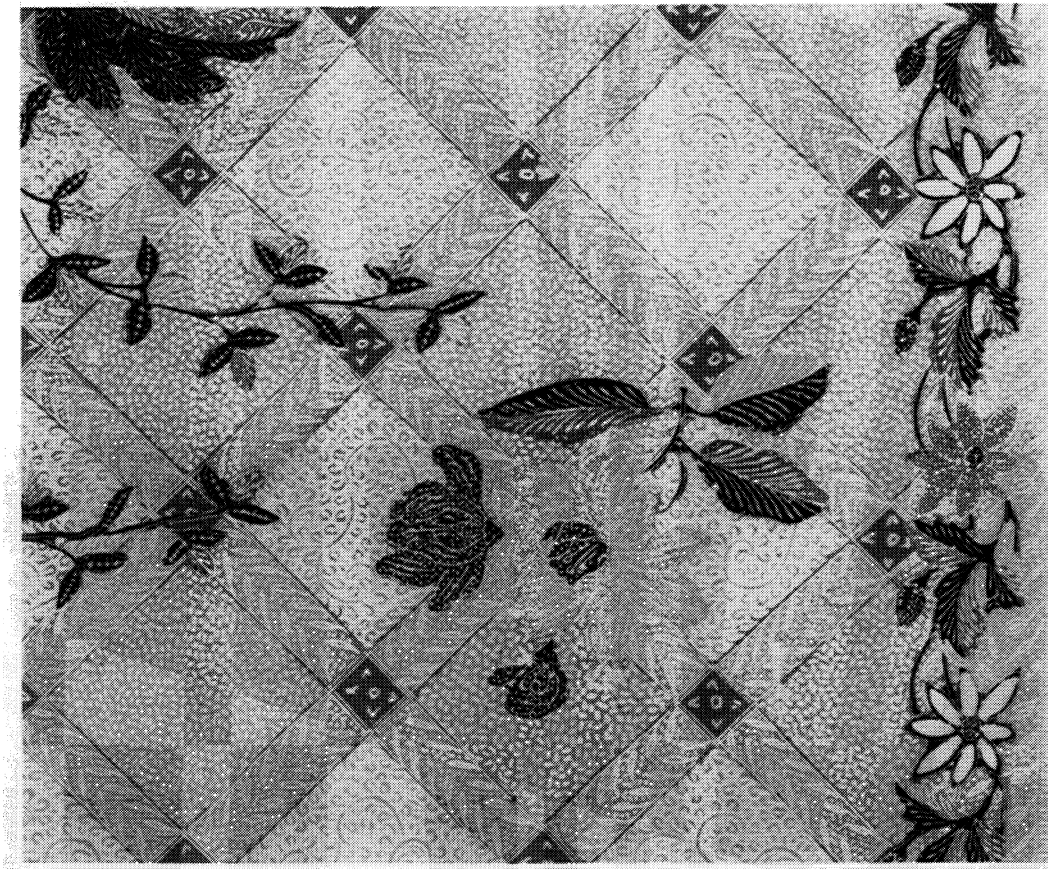


Plate 15. Kain Pekalongan, early twentieth century showing variation in isen isen.

There is room, too, for studies of individual designers' work where there are sufficient textiles available to examine variation and creativity.<sup>54</sup> Studies of the preferences of different markets in Java and Indonesia for different designs and patterns is another aspect of batik which has yet to be written. How did non batik-making communities "read" batik? Has too much attention been paid to the analysis of the symbolic significance of batik motifs and patterns? In the export destinations it is likely that a different set of aesthetic preferences operated, and analysis of non-Javanese communities' perceptions of batik might reveal insights into relations between Java and the outer islands.

Finally, the revival in batik from the 1950s through to the major changes in the mode of production of batik in the late 1970s<sup>55</sup> is another (evolutionary) chapter of batik which needs further research. Modern mass production in recent years has introduced a whole new range of motifs and patterns into batik, patterns which draw on the decorative style of non batik-making cultures, patterns which have established batik, long after Sukarno had the vision, as a true Indonesian textile tradition.

<sup>54</sup> The article by Robyn and John Maxwell on MD Hadi's work is an important contribution of this kind. The work of Hardjonagoro, Iwan Tirta, and Nyai Bei is sufficiently varied and distinctive as to warrant specialist study.

<sup>55</sup> *Prisma*, "Can Traditional Batik Survive?" 27 (1983): 82-92; Philip Kitley, "Batik and Popular Culture," *Prisma* 43 (1987): 8-24